

ATTILA



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ATTILA

AT T I L A

A TRAGEDY IN FOUR ACTS

BY LAURENCE BINYON

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ATTILA

CHARACTERS

ATTILA, King of the Huns.

HERNAK, a boy, Attila's youngest son.

ONEGESIUS, a Greek, Attila's favourite counsellor.

SIGISMUND, a Burgundian, foster-brother of Ildico.

MESSALLA, }
LAETUS, } Roman Envoys.

RORIK, }
BURBA, } Huns of Attila's bodyguard.
ESLA, }

AN EGYPTIAN SOOTHSAYER.

CHABAS, a Greek Refugee.

ARDARIC, }
VALAMIR, } Subject Kings of the Goths and Gepids.

ZERCON, a Moorish Dwarf.

HUNS, BURGUNDIANS, etc.

KERKA, Wife of Attila.

ILDICO, a Burgundian Princess.

CUNEGONDE, GISLA, and other women attendant on Ildico.

Time : 453 A.D.

Place : A city of the Burgundians, conquered by Attila,
in the valley of the Upper Danube.

ATTILA

ACT I

SCENE

Part of a town of the Burgundians, occupied by ATTILA. A gate, left, in a wall, abutting on which, at the back, is the front of the house of ILDICO. At the right the colonnade of a large building, ATTILA'S headquarters. Beyond it an open rampart.

Dawn. A comet in the sky, fading as the light increases. Within the colonnade ESLA and a group of armed HUNS; in the space beyond a few MEN and WOMEN, cloaked against the cold air, come and go, with terrified glances at the comet. SIGISMUND leans against one of the further pillars. CHABAS lurks in the background. On the rampart a stationary figure, the SOOTHSAYER, watches the sky.

Enter from the left RORIK and BURBA, with two other HUNS.

ESLA

All night it has so streamed, like a great torch
Blown by the wind.

ATTILA

BURBA

And now outglares the dawn.

Rorik, I like it not.

RORIK

Quake in your flesh !

It shall not fright me from my appetite.

These prodigies perturb a hungry soul.

Eat, eat and drink !

[*The HUNS sit down to drink and dice.* CHABAS
comes forward, cringing.]

CHABAS

Speak for me to the King,

Sirs ! I have lent him moneys. I am lost.

The King forgets a poor man has his needs.

RORIK

Here's pay for you !

[*Strikes him.*]

BURBA

And usury too. Out, rat !

[CHABAS, *driven off, goes toward* SIGISMUND.]

RORIK

[*lifting his cup to the comet*]

To Attila's splendour !

BURBA

[holding RORIK'S arm]

No, you drink our doom.

CHABAS

Ten talents ! Listen, my lord Sigismund !

SIGISMUND

[turning his back]

Ten talents ! Will that buy back liberty
For my lost land ?

RORIK

Is that a mortal man
Or rooted effigy that stands and stares
On this dishevelled star ?

BURBA

A man, but who
I know not.

ESLA

'Tis the Egyptian.

BURBA

The Soothsayer ?
The master of magicians ?

ESLA

Half the night

He has watched this witch-fire burning, motionless.
Look now, he turns.

RORIK

Come, let us question him.—

O man of dreams and auguries, who read
Fate's crooked signs and characters, pronounce
This apparition's meaning.

HUNS

Ay, what means it?

BURBA

Famine, I fear.

RORIK

Some prodigy of luck.

ESLA

For Attila what means it? Good or ill?

SOOTHSAYER

Is not great Attila King over kings?

ESLA

But this hangs over Attila. Speak out.

SOOTHSAYER

You men of war, why seek to deal with powers
Who forge their ends behind the enacted scene?
Play your hot parts out ; strike, slay and be slain !
To question blunts the sword, palsies the arm,
Curdles the blood : oppose her as you will,
Calamity will come——

ALL

Calamity !

SOOTHSAYER

Hastes not for terror, tarries not for hope. •

ONEGESIUS

*[who has entered from the right during the
last words]*

Who talks of terror and calamity?
For whom?

SOOTHSAYER

For some.

ONEGESIUS

Ay, surely at this hour
The Roman streets throng with night-watchers
pale,
Who cower and cry that this means Attila,
The terror and calamity of Rome.

HUNS

Hear Onegesius !

BURBA

Over us it hangs.

ESLA

Yes, over us, and over Attila.

ONEGESIUS

Fools ! whom should Heaven give sign to but to
him

Whom long ago it chose and certified
A meteor among men, a captain star,
The master of the warriors of the world ?
Have you forgot the sword——

HUNS

Attila's sword !

ONEGESIUS

The miracle, the sword God flung from Heaven
There on the Scythian steppe : have you forgot
How when the Hunnish host stood in amaze
And terror as you stand now, Attila
Caught up the sword as 'twere God's thunderbolt
Of everlasting wrath ? Have you forgot,
Who have seen it blaze in Attila's right hand
And armies quail before it ? While the sword

Is with him, mortal cannot harm him. Now
 This second sign, this glory out of night,
 This plume, this flower, this fount of golden seed,
 Attila takes to be his crest, a gift
 From Heaven, a blazon of God's own device,
 A brand to burn upon the battle's van
 Lighting to victory.

RORIK

Ay, if battle came !
 But Attila is changed ; we rust in peace.

ESLA

How glib the Greek is !

BURBA

Now, Egyptian, speak.

SOOTHSAYER

Fear, fear : 'tis wiser.

ONEGESIUS

Still do you pretend
 That Attila is menaced ?

SOOTHSAYER

Attila

Himself may override the wave of doom.
 I read not yet who shall be lost in it—

A man may own a dearer thing to wound
Than his own body. Attila has sons.

ONEGESIUS

This man talks treason. Seize him and keep close
In guard at the King's will. Away with him !

[*Two HUNS arrest and take away the SOOTH-
SAYER.*]

There let the raven croak to the blank walls.
But you, I charge you, if your tongues report
Or private conversation entertain
This madness, 'tis at peril of your life.

RORIK

Spare threats, Sir Counsellor, you waste your
words.
See, the thing's quenched, and the sun's up in
heaven.

[ONEGESIUS *parts the curtains of* ILDICO'S
house, but is stopped on the threshold by
CUNEGONDE.]

CUNEGONDE

The Princess sleeps yet.

ONEGESIUS

Let her be awakened ;
She is summoned by the King. I shall return.
[*Exit ONEGESIUS. CUNEGONDE retires.*]

RORIK

[*pointing to ILDICO'S house*]

There is the portent you should look to, Huns!
No fiery mare's tail hung across the dark,
But one that wears a body, walks daylight,
A mischief with a woman's shape and eyes.
Plague strike and end all women!

[BURBA *touches* RORIK *as* HERNAK *comes out,*
right.]

Ah, my prince!

Now may my curse fall fortunate for him!

HERNAK

I have a new bow, Rorik.

RORIK

Let me try it.

A sweet note! But for those young arms 'tis
tough.

HERNAK

Give it me back. See, I can bend it full.

RORIK

Come soon the day when I shall see your shaft
Dive to the feathers home in Roman flesh.
Are you for hunting? Shall I go with you?

HERNAK

I go alone. Rorik, tell not my mother,
For she forgets I grow to be a man,
And a King's son, whose word tall men obey.

RORIK

There speaks your father's spirit! Good hunting,
Prince!
Be wary; the King's son is a great mark,
And discontented dogs of every tribe
Infest this place, to snap what gain they can.

HERNAK

I have my bow, my new bow, and sharp arrows.

BURBA

A Hun of the Huns!

RORIK

Why was he born the last?

CHABAS

[intercepting HERNAK as he is going out, left]

O my young lord, a boon before you go!
Speak favourably to the King for me.
I have waited month on month, and am not
paid.
The King has many cares, and he forgets.

HERNAK

Speak to the Queen, my mother ; she will hear.

CHABAS

My lord, I do beseech you !

HERNAK

Let me go !

[HERNAK *shakes him off and goes out.* BURBA
and the other HUNS *sit down to dice.* RORIK
paces up and down.]

RORIK

Why was he not the first?

His brothers are but fit to follow him.

He captains them by nature.

ESLA

Ellak and Gengis,

Where are they gone?

RORIK

On foray,—quarrelling

As ever, which shall have the best of spoils,

Be it cattle or woman.

BURBA

Hernak for me ! But come,

A hazard, Rorik.

RORIK

Pest upon all women !

BURBA

Why, what 's the matter ?

RORIK

Witchcraft ! Attila

Wavers, not strikes, stoops and not soars. And we,
That overstormed all Europe, Scythia, Thrace,
Sarmatia, Illyria, lands on lands
From Caucasus to Ocean, must we halt
Content as puddle-blooded citizens,
While Rome, that still defies us, is unwon ?

ESLA

There 's thunder on the King 's brow ; when it
breaks——

BURBA

Old Rome will tremble. Ay, he has deep
thoughts.—
The luck 's all yours.

RORIK

'Tis witchcraft. Here we sit
With all the plains before us, cornered, cooped,
Stabled like oxen. O my soul is sick
Of being roofed and walled ! Air ! Bring a torch,

I say, and let these pale Burgundians burn
With the proud girl that rules them. Slaves to a
woman !

That ever Attila cast eyes—O gods,
This should be the Alps, and yonder Italy,
Vines, towers clashing all their bells in fear,
Rich cities quaking, walls to leap, and Rome.

BURBA

The dice are dull toys.

ESLA

Hark to Rorik !

RORIK

Then

We rode like wind, we leapt like rattling hail ;
Danube in flood-time could not race with us.
But now we must make platters of our shields,
And see our royal eagle witched and tamed,
A strutting pigeon in a castle-court
That coasts about the housetops and alights
To preen and coo. Lightning wither them all,
Pinch their lips cold, and mildew their soft cheeks,
All women, all, but specially this one,
This Ildico, who wastes our Attila !

ESLA

Is she the star with the long golden hair
That threatens all our heads ?

BURBA

She has a bloom,
And there's a fiery warning in her eye
Would tempt a man to tame her.

ESLA

They are proud,
These same Burgundians.

RORIK

I will find a way.

ESLA

Yonder's her foster-brother, Sigismund,
Dogging her door ; he too's her slave.

BURBA

He's pricked.
You have stirred him, Rorik.

RORIK

Were it not for her,
We should be feasting in imperial Rome.

SIGISMUND

Never will that be !

RORIK

Never ! that's a word
We know not. Will your lordship say us nay ?

SIGISMUND

Remember Alaric.

RORIK

He sacked Rome.

SIGISMUND

And died.

RORIK

Alaric was not Attila.

SIGISMUND

Rome is Rome !

Your day is over, Huns ; your King is staled

With conquest, he has lost the joy of it ;

The terror of his end has come on him.

Three sons at odds, and you without a king ;

Three sons at odds, and none to lead you. Laugh !

But you have seen the sign. [*Pointing to the sky.*]

BURBA

[*starting up*]

Stop the fool's mouth,

Or I will.

RORIK

[*stopping him*]

Not yet. I've a use for him.

B

SIGISMUND

You have seen the sign. Up, Huns, and save yourselves !

Seize what is yours. Attila scorns you. Up,
You are many ! Wield a purpose of your own.
Let Attila beware then !

RORIK

I say too,

Let Attila beware.

ESLA

Look, the Queen comes !

KERKA enters from the right.

CHABAS

[throwing himself at KERKA'S feet]

Favour, O Queen, favour a wronged poor man
Who cannot reach the King's ear. Plead for me.
I ask no more than justice. Hear, I pray.

KERKA

Better thy fortune with the fortunate !

ESLA

Enough of whining, fellow ; out of the way !

KERKA

Where is Prince Hernak ? Have you seen my son ?

BURBA

We saw him,—he was here some minutes since.

KERKA

I thank you. Is the King abroad?

RORIK

Not yet.

[She goes to the rampart and gazes out, then returns. The HUNS resume their dice.]

CHABAS

That boy shall be my vengeance. The lion's cub
Shall pay me ransom. *[He goes out, left.]*

KERKA

[addressing the HUNS]

Am I not Queen among you? Did I not
Ride with you, hunger with you, thirst with you?
Do I lose honour, or are you Huns no more?
O that the wide plains were about us still
Of our own East! Then Huns were Huns indeed,
And Kerka wanted not for loyalty.

RORIK

[respectfully]

Mother of Hernak—

KERKA

Thank you for that word!

RORIK

We suffer change, being mortal ; there 's no help,
But we must bear the thing we cannot shun.

KERKA

Rorik, have Hernak in your care.

RORIK

I will.

[*Exit* KERKA.]

BURBA

The setting sun !

ESLA

Rather the moon that hangs
Pale in the sunrise.

RORIK

Burba, here 's a thought.

BURBA

Let 's hear it.

RORIK

This Burgundian serves our turn.
With such a spur shall Attila be pricked.
I 'll take this Frank, heap fuel on his flame,
Breathe discontent and wrongs so desperate
As stick at nothing ; then, a midnight plot,

Swords out, and tumult ! Attila once roused,
If we strike not the old fire from his soul,
Call me a fool.

BURBA

For a fight or for a feast

I am your man.

ESLA

And the Burgundian ?

RORIK

Why,

We take him in the act. Kill, kill them all !
Come now, and drink to warlike days again !

[*Exeunt all but SIGISMUND.*]

[*ILDICO appears at the door of her house,
followed by CUNEGONDE.*]

SIGISMUND

Ildico !

ILDICO

Attila summons me.

SIGISMUND

Princess !

ILDICO

Speak then, but quickly.

SIGISMUND

The hour is come to act.
I have watched. I have planned. I have mingled
with the Huns ;
I know their thoughts. This streaming fire in
heaven
Affrights them ; they are muttering at their King,
Bated of prey and rapine.—Listen still.
I have men, I have swords.

ILDICO

See !

SIGISMUND

[as ONEGESIUS enters, right]

Onegesius !

ONEGESIUS

[to ILDICO]

The King commands your presence. He com-
mands
That you this day, with all your women, quit
This house, and enter his house.

SIGISMUND

O shame ! Shame !

Back to your tyrant !

ILDICO

Silence, Sigismund !

I speak, and for myself.—Sir, I refuse.

ONEGESIUS

That is your answer? Attila shall hear it.

[*Exit, right.*]

SIGISMUND

Ah, now you understand him, Ildico !
The Hun must die. This comet beacons us
To the fulfilment of that fear it writes
Already on these savage hearts. Not ours
But Fate's the deed. We want but Ildico
To lead us.

ILDICO

No more, Sigismund, of this.
Do I not know what it befits me do?
Stir not till I give word.

SIGISMUND

I wait the word.
Yet send it quickly. O, you cannot choose
But strike with us. Princess, my life is yours.
Fear not. If need be, I will strike alone. [*Exit.*]

ILDICO

O, put your arms about me, Cunegonde !
I want a friend.

CUNEGONDE

You have one.

A T T I L A

I L D I C O

I have you.

C U N E G O N D E

And Sigismund.

I L D I C O

Yes, Sigismund. But he
Would use me ; and I'll be no instrument
Of his or any man's. He plots and schemes.
Fool, fool, to match himself with Attila !

C U N E G O N D E

Together, not divided, you were strong.

I L D I C O

We were playmates together, girl and boy,
And dear remembrance knots our youth ; but now
We are not children, playing harmless games,
But face to face with terrible men. I count
The cost, and know sweet ties may break ; but
this
Is chosen and determined. I will meet
This our great enemy.

C U N E G O N D E

He never spares.
You have defied him ; think what power is his !
O rather flee.

ILDICO

Whither ?

CUNEGONDE

With Sigismund.

ILDICO

Ill counsel, Cunegonde, to a king's daughter !
Nothing is ever wise that is not brave.
All then were lost.

CUNEGONDE

But Attila—you know
That you have stirred his passion. If already
He has not snatched and taken you by force
And slain us all, it is that he will show
More surely now the savage Hun he is.

ILDICO

He has spared till now. You wrong him, Cune-
gonde.

Can one man rule a sea of raging men—
Have power to kindle them and calm at will—
By being brute as they are? Attila
Is greater than ten thousand of his Huns.
By his greatness, or his weakness, I will move him,
Pleading for all of us. Go, Cunegonde,
Seek Sigismund. Forbid him stir a hand
Till I command it. This must be. Go, now !

CUNEGONDE

And must I leave you? Will you stay alone
For Attila?

ILDICO

Alone. Fear not so much.

If I be driven to the uttermost,
If he should deem me like those Tartar women,
The only women of whose ways he knows,
Servile in blood and custom, that take pride
To be no more than a just-tasted cup,
A fortnight's fondling, a staled sweet, the last
Addition to his pleasure—if he think this,
Let me be accurst or he shall surely know
My difference. Sooner than a mouth of shame
He shall kiss death!

CUNEGONDE

What have you said? To kill
The master of the world! No man of all
The thousands hating him has lifted hand
To dare a thing so terrible.

ILDICO

'Tis true.

When some divine and more than mortal deed
Is to be done, the strong, the wise forbear,
And when a greatness through weak heart and
hand

Stammers into the splendour of a deed,
Pronounce it madness.—Go, seek Sigismund !
[*Exit CUNEGONDE.*]

ATTILA *enters, right.*

ATTILA

So ; I am defied !

ILDICO

The word is yours.

ATTILA

A woman ! Never man
Yet challenged Attila and lived : but now
A woman dares to brave him.—What are you ?
A witch's incarnation, without use
Of bodily senses or the taste of pain ?
No, flesh and blood, I swear ! Bethink you
then,
If I but lift a finger, you are crushed
Into what doom I choose.—Look in my face.
You are quailing in your heart,—confess to it.

ILDICO

What if I be ? O, I can feel and fear.
No magic art defends me, no, nor hope
Of help ; my flesh fears, but not yet my soul.
Put chains upon my body. Do all your will.
I am not, shall not, cannot be your slave.

ATTILA

So proud ?

ILDICO

What would you have of me ? Hate, hate ?
Such an immortal hate——

ATTILA

Have I struck fire ?
Flame, then ! A woman's hate—I never knew
A woman kindle——

ILDICO

No, you never knew
A woman not a slave ; but we, but we
Women of the West are of another mould.
You smite in me a people.

ATTILA

Conquered !

ILDICO

No,
You tread on fire.

ATTILA

My heel can stamp it out.

ILDICO

But it will smoulder till it burst afresh.

ATTILA

What's this? What do you speak of? Tell me more.

What seek you of me?

ILDICO

Attila's glory! O,
Listen! Within these sheltering walls a child,
That from these towers eyed often the vast plains,
The hills, and Danube rushing to the East,
Grew up; and, ere she was a woman, heard
The rumour of the name of Attila
Come rolling like a thunder from afar.
She pictured him most royal; she was born
Of generous free blood; she saw him stride
A demi-god, a god, a destiny,
That plucked up kings like thistles: cities burned
To be his torches; he was born to exceed
All measures of men's thought.—She was a child.
But now——

ATTILA

But now?

ILDICO

She is a woman now,
And she has known what madness in men's blood
Blinds them like hunger; tasted the sharp breath
Of suffering, and beheld the different world

Dark under cold heavens, deaf to anguished
cries

That pierced into her heart. And yet sometimes

She listens to her old thoughts asking her

Will Attila be less than she had dreamed?

Will he, even he, be nothing but the storm

That yesterday crashed on our roofs, and now

Where is it? None knows. O, you burn and
waste ;

But blackened earth teems richer for her loss

When all your Huns are past.—Speak, Attila !

I have told my heart out, I am in your hand.

Take me, and bind me, and kill me—what you
will—

But let my people free ! I plead for them,

As I will answer for them.

ATTILA

[*after a pause*]

You are free.

[*Then with passion.*] Ildico !—

[*ILDICO has disappeared into her house without
looking back.*]

ONEGESIUS *enters, right.*

ONEGESIUS

Is she humbled as befits ?

ATTILA

She is humbled as the hawk is when he mounts,
Or lioness that's hunted from her mate ;
A mother-mould of stormy-hearted men !

ONEGESIUS

Better to take and to forget her, King.

ATTILA

I'll have her soul, not only her body, mine ;
And surely as the heart beats at my ribs
Mine shall she be. To touch resistance, feel
Within my fingers the proud, delicate flower,
And not to harm what I could crush at will
In an instant—there's an edge and zest in this
Those women of the East, of my own race,
Never provoked. But I shall tame her. Well?

ONEGESIUS

This soothsayer—

ATTILA

I have heard an oracle
Speak from a woman. Onegesius, what say you?
Shall the Hun plant his spear in the old earth
And strike a root, to branch abroad, and end
His wanderings?

ONEGESIUS

The Hun's blood can never rest.

ATTILA

ATTILA

Rome mocks me, mocks me with her thousand
years.

My spear should be the king-post of a house
Deep-founded and enduring.

ONEGESIUS

This soothsayer,——

ATTILA

What mischief has he told ?

ONEGESIUS

Your soldiers fear
That nightly portent streaming past the stars,
And this man threatens.

ATTILA

Me? God's sword is mine.

ONEGESIUS

'Tis not yourself he hints of peril to.

ATTILA

What then ?

ONEGESIUS

Your line——

ATTILA

My line ?

ONEGESIUS

Your sons.

ATTILA

My sons !

I'll see him ! Were that true ? Now I remember
'Twas prophesied before. At Danube's passage
A witch croaked thus. I'll see this soothsayer.
Bid him prepare : furnish him all his art
Has need of : he shall question Fate. My sons !
I must have sons ; I am maimed without a son.
I melt and crumble like the summer ice
With all my empire, if I have no son ;
But I will be eternal as this Rome,
So I have sons.

ONEGESIUS

When shall the man await your majesty ?

ATTILA

Fear knocks upon my heart, lest this be true.
—To-night, to-night !

ONEGESIUS

Shall the Egyptian die ?

Silence is safest.

ATTILA

No, I fear him not.
Whatever secret the locked lips of Fate
Yield to his art, be it good or ill, I'll know it.
[Exit ONEGESIUS.]

Dust ! to be ended and extinguished here
In my own body ! All of me that goes
Riding to conquer Time, lost, overthrown !
And Rome remaining, Rome remaining !

HERNAK *enters, left.*

HERNAK

Father !

ATTILA

'There's blood upon you, boy !

HERNAK

Father !

ATTILA

Blood !

Does it begin already ?—You are pale, you tremble.
Where are your brothers ? Is there news of them ?
You are hurt, boy. Speak !

HERNAK

I am not trembling, father.
'Tis not my blood. I killed him !

ATTILA

Tell me again.
—Could Chance, could Fate in fleshly form appear,
That were a thing to kill.

HERNAK

I am your son.

I killed him ; he is dead.

ATTILA

Who dead? How dead? Was there no stroke
from Heaven?

HERNAK

It was a Greek who supplicated me
When I was going out ; I would not hear,
And he came after me, and in the hollow
Down by the postern met me suddenly.
He had a horse and caught me to his saddle,
Swearing you should pay ransom for your son,
And spurred away. But I was not afraid.

ATTILA

No, Hernak.

HERNAK

And my knife was in my belt.
I caught him by the throat and stabbed him.

ATTILA

How?

HERNAK

The Hun's way, so !

ATTILA

ATTILA

[*kissing him*]

Brave Hernak! That's my boy!

HERNAK

I am a man now, father, am I not?

I would be like my father and hear men say

'He is Attila's own son.'

ATTILA

[*putting him away*]

More terrible

Than Attila, I hoped . . .

[*With sudden suspicion.*] Where is your mother?

Speak, boy!

HERNAK

What changes and what angers you?

Why do I vex you?

ATTILA

Did she set you on,

Smeared with false blood and tricked with a false
tale,

To play upon the father's pride in me?

HERNAK

I told the truth. You never taught me lies.

ATTILA

Go wash that blood off. [HERNAK *withdraws.*]
 Whence fell that shadow? 'Tis but shadow, yet
 How strangely colours as in fatal hues
 What is mere accident! The boy's unhurt.
 Why should Fate play these tricks, make mouths
 at me
 Behind a horrible mask, to snatch it off
 And smile—and smile!
 [*With sudden change.*] Hernak! Son! My son!

HERNAK

[*running back*]

My father!

ATTILA

We're not taken, spite of Fate
 And all her gins; we'll make her omens laugh,
 You and I, boy. You shall surpass me yet,
 And we will war down everlasting Rome—
 The weak can never wait, but I am patience—
 Your son's son shall inhabit Cæsar's house,
 The ships on all the seas shall be his ships:
 Far into Time I see them . . . sons! My sons!

CURTAIN

ACT II

SCENE I

A vaulted room. A door at the back, left, another small one at the right, near which the SOOTH-SAYER stands with eyes fixed on a small stone altar on which a flame burns.

ATTILA enters, followed by ONEGESIUS.

ATTILA

What has the fierce star written? What is hid
In heaven against me? Tell me of my sons.—
Onegesius, leave us. Wait without the door.

[ONEGESIUS goes out, closing the door.]

[To the SOOTHSAYER after a silence.]

Thou art in my hand!

SOOTHSAYER

And thou, O Attila? . . .

ATTILA

Find me the means to satisfy my soul!
If holy or unholy arts have power,
If by persuasion or by force thou canst

Ravish from Time his secret, drag it forth !—
 I hear you famed beyond the common tribe
 Of soothsayers ; magicians call you master.
 Prove it ! Whence got you this so potent lore ?

SOOTHSAYER

Chaldean sages taught me in their towers
 That watch the stars ; in Egypt I was born ;
 Their art is patient to conjure and charm
 Out of their time the face of hours unborn.

ATTILA

Summon them up.

SOOTHSAYER

What I can do, I shall.

But boast not more.
 Behold, we walk our little hour of light
 Toward this great dark that fronts us like a wall.
 All we shall do is there, and all we fear.

ATTILA

Thrust and break in : seize Fate and force her
 speak.

SOOTHSAYER

Beware lest from her ambush, ere thou knowest,
 She leap out at thee.

ATTILA

ATTILA

What's the peril? Where?

SOOTHSAYER

Thou art threatened.

ATTILA

Ah!

SOOTHSAYER

This meteor that makes pale
The natural lights of heaven——

ATTILA

Speak! what of this?

SOOTHSAYER

O Attila, a power stands over thee
Poising, but whether to strike out thy doom
Or to enrich thee, hangs uncertain yet.
The time awaits thy grapple; thou shalt know
When Fate makes of thy hands her implements
And thou the accomplice bring her deed to birth.

ATTILA

What power is this whose menace I must fear?

SOOTHSAYER

If my ancestral art have rightly spelled,
A woman.

ATTILA

Of my race?

SOOTHSAYER

Nay, strange to thee.

ATTILA

Her name?

SOOTHSAYER

Sign tells not : this is not revealed.

Yet of her blood she is born thine enemy.

ATTILA

Enemy born, yet may be turned to boon

SOOTHSAYER

Her destiny and thine are interlocked.

ATTILA

And nothing of the event?

SOOTHSAYER

I read no more.

ATTILA

Is this thy boasted art and magic skill?

Thou bat, thou owl, that chatterest in the dark

What every eye but thine sees plain by day!

Thou keep'st the secret back.

ATTILA

SOOTHSAYER

Patience, O King.

ATTILA

Bethink thee of some engine to extort
Fate's meaning, or I swear——

SOOTHSAYER

Patience, O King !

Thyself must question ; thou art in the plot,
The agent and conniving will : to thee
Fate will speak clear what is to others dark.
My office is to show thee how.

ATTILA

Begin !

SOOTHSAYER

All is prepared. Behold this altar-stone——

ATTILA

What is the flame that burns so still on it ?

SOOTHSAYER

Thy destiny !—Take in thy hand this dust
Compounded of all secret roots that mean
All manner of untimeliness to man,
Plucked at conjunction of disastrous stars,
And sprinkle it upon the fire.

ATTILA

What then ?

SOOTHSAYER

If destiny, which is the flame, be bright,
'Twill be consumed, the fire will feed on it ;
But if the doom be short, the flame will die.

ATTILA

So.

SOOTHSAYER

Seek thy fate then.

ATTILA

My fate ? What of that ?

My doom is dated somewhere in the book.
But I am girded with the sword of God
Which is the fate, part of whose will I am ;
No, but the after-days and after-doom,
My empire and succession's heritage—
This troubles me : a wild witch long ago
Predicted me misfortune in my sons.
I would learn their fate.

SOOTHSAYER

Nothing of thine own ?

ATTILA

Do as I bid thee !

SOOTHSAYER

Sprinkle then the dust,
Pronounce thy sons' names each in turn, and hold
His image in thy heart, nought else, the while.

ATTILA

[taking the dust in his hand]

This then for thee, Ellak, my eldest born !
The first that called me father—this for thee !
Thy mother bore thee on the Tartar plain.
Ah, wild and headstrong then I rode and fought,
Not yet a king, and wild and headstrong thou.
Ambition went not to thy getting, boy !
I would not have thee rule, save in such sort
As now, some subject tribe ; thou art a hand
But not a brain—Yet, this for thee.

*[He casts the dust on the flame, which goes out
at once.]*

So sudden ?

A straw would have burnt longer.

SOOTHSAYER

Fate so wills.

[He rekindles the flame.]

ATTILA

[taking another handful of dust]

Gengis, my second, this for thee. Is thine
As short a date ? Thou hast a subtle brain

And goest about with eyes upon the ground,
Getting thy ends ; but no, thou art not loved.
Destiny will not choose thee.

[*He casts the dust again, with the same result.*]

Gone ! thou too.

Drive me to the outpost, I am not subdued ;
But one remains, but one, yet he the best.
My Hernak ! Fortune ! if thou choose not him,
If thou use not this precious-metalled ore
To mould and to refine thy masterpiece,
But blindly waste it, then I'll call thee all
That men have cursed thee for, convict indeed
Thy crooked and capricious purposes
In their proclaimed futility. Why then,
The world were chaos, Destiny no more
Than a giant idiot with a random hand
Stumbling and striking. 'Tis impossible !

[*He is about to cast the dust, then hesitates.*]

If it should be ? Hernak, my Hernak, brave,
Wise past his years, courteous, contained, beloved.
Flesh of my flesh, will of my will—all prayers
I ever prayed are in this hand !

[*He casts the dust on the flame, which leaps
a moment then goes out.*]

[*To the SOOTHSAYER*] 'Tis false,
Thou vile pretender ! Thou hast been suborned.
Confess ! I'll tear the life out of thy limbs,
Cut shrieking into pieces ! I'll have all

Thy tribe of sorcerers suddenly put out
As these brief fires !

SOOTHSAYER

Perform thy threats ; 'tis vain :
The Gods bear witness.

ATTILA

Tush !—'tis true, 'tis true.

[*He begins to pace up and down.*]

The badge of blood was on him for a sign,
And I would not believe ! My boy, my boy !
I thought to shoot an arrow fast and far :
It falls before my feet. . . .
When he was sucking at his mother's breast
My hope was big in him ; but now—but now—
Must I be balked of all my soul begot ?
I stamp upon the ground, and armies spring.
Thou shalt not have him, Death, or if thou dost,
By all the fiends and furies that rush in
To make their hell-home in the heart of man,
I swear that for each pang I suffer now
I will exact a thousand from the world,
I will spare nothing : Italy shall be
My vineyard, and the wine of it be blood—
Red spirting blood beneath my dancers' feet ;
And Rome, Rome, Rome, out of her orphaned
mouths,

KERKA *enters hurriedly, and throws herself
at his feet.*

Kerka !

KERKA

Woe,

Woe to our house !

ATTILA

Speak !

KERKA

Our two elder sons !

News comes that on a foray quarrelling——

ATTILA

You talk of ghosts that wander the wild air !

KERKA

They are dead ? You know it ?

ATTILA

Dead !

KERKA

If it be true

That miserably they have slain each other,
Still we have Hernak.

ATTILA

We ?

KERKA

O Attila,

Thank we the Gods still for our best-beloved !

ATTILA

Ha, ha !

KERKA

Why do you laugh so dreadfully ?

ATTILA

The hounds are yelping at the quarry's heel ;
Their fangs grin ; Death hallooos. The boy is
down.

Gather your wailing-women, make the grave !
He is dead !

KERKA

He lives !

ATTILA

A moment, and no more.

KERKA

You rave ! Remember how you prayed for him,—
The youngest, yet you swore he was the best,
Since on your knee he sat and with small hand
Drew your great sword a little from its sheath,
And looked into your eyes.

D

ATTILA

No more of that !

Out, grief, out of my bosom ! Say no more.

I have put this all behind me.

KERKA

Attila !

ATTILA

The oracle has doomed him.

KERKA

It is false !

If it were true, my heart would know it first,
The heart beneath the breast that suckled him.—
Will you not use one fond word to your wife
That bore him you ?

ATTILA

I loved you.

KERKA

Loved, loved, loved !

O bitterest of words to her that loves !

ATTILA

You should have borne another. It is too late.
Better to have been barren from the first
Than breed such hope, to blast it in the flower.
A malediction lies upon that womb !

KERKA

Ah ! it is Ildico, not me, you love.

ATTILA

I say, that you are wife of mine no more.

KERKA

She ! she ! Yet Hernak lives. I know he lives !

[*After a pause.*]

I am my lord's. I must bow even to this.
 Heaven is just, Heaven will hearken. In that day
 Remember me. You love out of your race,
 Out of your blood. Think you that Ildico
 Will be as Kerka ? She will love, may be,
 But with exactions, with suspicions, proud
 In contraries to try you ; something always,
 As Western women in their nature use,
 You'll not possess, some citadel apart ;
 She'll never give you of her very soul
 As I you cast away.

ATTILA

Farewell.

KERKA

My sons !

[KERKA goes out as ONEGESIUS enters.]

A T T I L A

ONEGESIUS

What said the Egyptian? Ellak, Gengis slain?
What of the oracle?

A T T I L A

Sponge out the dead !
The wound is here, but the hot iron put to it.
From now my soul despises to be hurt.
Fate strikes me to enrich me, stings to spur,
To stubborn and enkindle. I am chosen,
Destined.

ONEGESIUS

What mean you?

A T T I L A

Attila is awakened,
And he will match him with this mighty Rome
That boasts her birth beyond the count of time.

ONEGESIUS

If it please you, hear——

A T T I L A

I, I will be eternal ;
Out of the teeming chaos that's to be
My will shall fetch and mould to form and flesh
Its long-unborn fulfilment : I have seen
In vision rising up a line of kings,
And each more terrible than the last.

ONEGESIUS

The present——

ATTILA

No counsel, Onegesius.

ONEGESIUS

Who should be
Mightier than Attila?

ATTILA

He shall come, I tell you,
And Ildico shall mother him.

ONEGESIUS

Beseech you,
Beware of Ildico, beware of her.
These same Burgundians are a sullen folk,
That cherish wrongs like oaths and sacred vows.
This marriage is unholy in their eyes.
Your death is dearer than their lives to them.
Take heed, lest perfidy stab home at you.

ATTILA

Pish! Gnats of summer, let them bite their fill.
What hour is it?

ONEGESIUS

Past midnight; dawn draws near.

ATTILA

Get you to bed. I shall not sleep.

[ONEGESIUS *is going out, then returns.*]

ONEGESIUS

My lord.

ATTILA

What now?

ONEGESIUS

The Egyptian sorcerer. 'Twere well
That he were silenced. I fear blabbing tongues.
This man's a danger.

ATTILA

End him as you will.
I have used him. Let all go that served my past.
The world arises new, and I with it.
—What was that noise?

ONEGESIUS

[*listening at the door*]

Some stirring in the town,
Far off. All's still now.

ATTILA

So the future stirs.
To bed! I'll see the dawn up, Time's new dawn.

SCENE II

*The same scene as in ACT I. Night. RORIK,
BURBA, and other HUNS gather near the gate.*

BURBA

What of the King?

RORIK

I wait for Esla's word.

BURBA

Is it past midnight?

RORIK

The first cock has crowed.

BURBA

Give us our cues again.

RORIK

Stand to your stations :

You, Burba, there ; I by the doorpost here,
The rest behind. No noise until the signal.

BURBA

Three knocks upon the gate, and on the third
We drop the bolt.

Enter ESLA hurriedly.

RORIK

What now ?

ESLA

A curse is on us.

The King is not abed, cannot be found.

He is gone with Onegesius, none knows where.

RORIK

That crafty Greek is ever crossing me.

BURBA

What's to be done?

ESLA

They whisper that he tries

The oracles of that Egyptian.

RORIK

O,

We'll find him matter for his auguries.

This shall be richer sport. He shall be roused,

Fear not ; I'll parley with this Sigismund,

Say Attila is warned, the secret known.

He must hammer on the door and come, swords
out,

For open fight.

ESLA

Well thought.

BURBA

My fingers itch.

RORIK

Soft ! not so loud. Already I have primed
 A score of men to hold the several gates
 And at the signal make such clamouring show
 The town shall seem invaded and at arms.
 Meanwhile we keep these Franks in noisy fence
 Till the King comes ; and when the hubbub grows
 So huge a roaring as would start the dead,
 And Attila with anger in his eyes
 Strides in, why then—let swords leap all about
 him ;
 We'll spice his nostril with the scent of war,
 Cry ' Kill ! ' and ' Lead us ! '

BURBA

There'll be slaying then !

ESLA

A merry time !

RORIK

Hush, all !

BURBA

Is it yet the hour ?

RORIK

Some minutes still : wait for the knocking ; now
 Like mouse to hole.

[*The HUNS retire to their hiding-places. ' After*

a brief pause ILDICO *comes out from her house and sits down on the steps, her head in her hands. CUNEGONDE follows her, and touches her on the shoulder.]*

CUNEGONDE

Here in the cold air?

ILDICO

O, I could not sleep.
I stifled. Will it soon be dawn?

CUNEGONDE

Quite soon.

Come,—come to bed.

ILDICO

What do you listen for?

CUNEGONDE

I thought there was a sound without the gate.

ILDICO

You tremble.

[*Seizing her arm.*]

CUNEGONDE

Come away!

ILDICO

What do you fear?

What do your eyes seek yonder in the dark?

No, I'll not come till you have answered me.

CUNEGONDE

It is not fear, but hope. Yet I fear too.

Sigismund—hark!—Sigismund is in arms.

He has mustered all the boldest of our folk,

And strikes to-night for freedom and for you.

ILDICO

My word was pledged he stirred not. Cunegonde,

Did you not carry my command to him?

CUNEGONDE

He is a man : he would not listen. Ah !

He is in peril ; would you thwart him now?

ILDICO

Woe to you ! You have betrayed me ! You, my
friend.

Where is the King?

CUNEGONDE

He sleeps.

ILDICO

What was that sound?

CUNEGONDE

A sword striking the wall.

ILDICO

The King, the King !

He must be warned.

ESLA

Back ! no one enters here.

[ILDICO *and* CUNEGONDE *retire behind the colonnade. Three knocks sound upon the gate.*]

RORIK

[*coming forward*]

Knock louder, man ! Louder ! The King is warned !

No use for secrecy. Make show as if
An army came. Hammer, to fetch him up !
A loud alarm ! Then we shall take him here
Trapped and alone.

SIGISMUND

[*without*]

Open !

RORIK

Let fall the bolt.

SIGISMUND

[rushing in with a troop of BURGUNDIANS]

Attila, Attila ! Where hides the Hun ?

RORIK

He comes.

BURBA

Meanwhile a bout of fencing, friend.

RORIK

Lights, Esla, lights ! *[HUNS bring torches.]*

SIGISMUND

[defending himself]

What devilry is this ?

BURBA

Stand to your guard ! Now were we not at play,
Your head were cloven through.

SIGISMUND

Where hides your King ?
Let fall your blade a breathing-space.

BURBA

Good sport !
[An uproar without begins and increases.]

RORIK

Now we will rouse him. Huns, he shall see blood !
[*He kills a BURGUNDIAN.*]

BURGUNDIANS

Flee ! Treachery !

[*Some flee, pursued by the HUNS, who try to
shut the gate.*]

HUNS

Kill, kill ! Attila !

SIGISMUND

[*still defending himself*]

Snake, devil !

Was this your trap ?

RORIK

For simple souls like you
Such traps are made. Stay, Burba, hold him yet,
And he shall have his stroke at Attila.

[*ILDICO comes out among them.*]

ILDICO

[*to RORIK*]

Free this man !

SIGISMUND

Ildico !

RORIK

At whose command?

SIGISMUND

Not that name, Ildico.

ILDICO

In Attila, the King's name, I command.

ATTILA

[suddenly appearing from the right]

Who speaks for Attila?

ILDICO

Ildico, my lord.

I am shamed. I knew not of this thing. I thought
My people heeded my command,—and yet,
Give me this man's life.

RORIK

Let me kill the slave.

He meant your murder.

ATTILA

Free him! By God's wrath,
Do you know your King?

*[The HUNS release SIGISMUND, but disarm him
first.]*

Your blades are ready; come,
I'll stop this hubbub. Burba, take your guard,

Speed to the north gate, put the riot down.
Rorik, with me !

RORIK

To the world's end, my King !
Now Attila is Attila again.

[ATTILA *and the HUNS disperse right and left.*]

SIGISMUND

I had him in my hand. A thousand curses !

ILDICO

He shone like fire. O, this was Attila !

SIGISMUND

The traitor, the damned snake ! And O, fool me !

ILDICO

Hark how the uproar at his coming dies.

SIGISMUND

Ildico !

ILDICO

Hark !

SIGISMUND

Ildico ! Have you drunk
Of poison, are you witched with sorceries,
Is your blood changed, to have used that hateful
name ?

ILDICO

He set you free.

SIGISMUND

Ay, that's the bitterest sting !

For your sake.

ILDICO

For my sake, yes, for my sake.

SIGISMUND

Have you no shame to feel and to be stung ?
—Ah ! do you dream of empire, and with him,
Because you own a corner of his mind
And are the last thing that has pleased his eye,
To-morrow loathed, enjoyed, and cast away ?

ILDICO

No more of outrage.

SIGISMUND

Ildico, I love you
To my life's end. I am mad with love and hate !

ILDICO

Sigismund, he will crush you with his heel.
Go.

SIGISMUND

Never will I see you bride of him !
Either he dies, or I.

E

ILDICO

Go !

[SIGISMUND *goes out as ATTILA returns.*]

ATTILA

Ildico !

If these few mutinous swords had been a thousand,
This petty tumult the whole world in arms,
I would have borne you from the midst. Mine,
mine !

'Tis written in the unalterable stars.

I have heard to-night God crying out of heaven
'Ildico, Ildico !'

ILDICO

Not yet, not yet !

ATTILA

Now ! For Heaven puts from me the wife I had.
A curse is on her, but on you the choice.
The oracle has spoken ; we are bound
In destiny together. O, by my soul
I love you !

ILDICO

Is it written so, past strength
To break or alter, past all strength of will,
Of fear, of anguish ?

ATTILA

It is written so ;

You shall be mine.

ILDICO

My captain and my King !

Let me not think : I totter. O blind me, blind me

In love that burns up all I cast away !

Let it all burn, and one great single flame

Clothe us for ever ! Hide me, thou strong tower !

[She buries her head in his breast, then looks up.]

ATTILA

My love is fierce, never will let thee go.

ILDICO

O turn not eyes so terrible on me !

ATTILA

Ah ! seest thou, seest thou?—Give me back my
sons !

Thou bitter sweet, canst thou so much atone ?

Canst thou ? Thou shalt ! Heaven swears it me,
thou shalt !

Down, images of terror, to the gulf

You sprang from ! I defy you ! Here and here

Out of black night I kiss thee, life for life.

ILDICO

What agony shakes from you such wild words?
What haggard sights are staring?

ATTILA

Scorching leaves,
Where hundred hopes were green! Thou hast
slain my sons.

ILDICO

I?

ATTILA

Thou.

ILDICO

They live.

ATTILA

The flutter of a spark,
No more. The hour's dated. They are sentenced.
O,

When thou didst come, shining across my path,
God hung their doom in heaven, a fiery sign——

ILDICO

Look where the black-winged clouds have fled
off—
Yonder it burns again!

ATTILA

By that bright doom,
By my soul's waste and desert, by the pang,
The loss, the fury, thou shalt all avenge,
Thou famine and thou feast, thou desolation
And thou all future joy !

[*Putting a torch above her head.*]

Stand in the light,
Thou challenge of mortality, thou Queen !
Is it of mortal stuff that thou art made,
That housest Time's great secret ?

Wound and bliss,
Cruel and precious with the cost of death,
I kiss thy robe,
Thou nourisher and mould of kings to be !

ILDICO

Ah ! take my body, take my soul, take all
I am and was and shall be—but a woman,
Only a woman !

ATTILA

Woman, and my bride !
Yon streaming star of loss and death shall change
His omened fire to be our nuptial torch.
The morrow comes——

ILDICO

Look how the east is pale !

ATTILA

Dawn ! The new day, new heaven, and new earth.
Now Attila has shaken off his sleep
And you shall see him kindled. He whose hand
Holds over us that wonder in the sky
Wields also me. I am the sword. And lo,
Yonder the world that waits us ; all the world !

ILDICO

Ah ! thither, thither let us speed, my King,
Speed on fast horses : let us drink the wind.
There is no rough fare that shall not be sweet,
No bed not soft, no hardship not delight,
So I am with you. Take me, carry me
Out of all this, out of all this, for ever !
[*A trumpet sounds in the distance.*]
A trumpet in the night !

ATTILA

I know that peal :
It challenges my fate.

ILDICO

[*Trumpet again, nearer.*]
Hark, hark again !

ATTILA

I have heard that sound upon the blood-red field
A hundred times. Ildico, Ildico,

Our horses' hoofs shall stamp the Sacred Street,
And you shall sit throned in the Capitol ;
For pleasaunce walks you shall have continents,
For jewels, subject cities—— [*Trumpet again.*]

ILDICO

Attila !

What summons blows? The dawn is breaking.
Hark !

ATTILA

It is Rome's trumpet—You shall reign in Rome.

CURTAIN

ACT III

SCENE I

The same scene as in ACT I. Midday. Groups of people passing by or loitering, among them BURBA, ESLA, and other HUNS. Enter from the right RORIK, in haste.

BURBA

Rorik !

RORIK

War ! By the Dragon, war ; we shall have war !
I tell you Attila is stirred at last ;
These mouldering days are done.

BURBA

Tell us of the envoys.

ESLA

These Romans——

BURBA

Has he sent them packing home
With a challenge ? Did he threat them ? Did you
hear ?

RORIK

They have not seen him.

ESLA

How?

RORIK

Refused, contemned!

You shall see them in a minute come this way
With flouted faces muttering anxiously
In one another's ear.

ESLA

He would not see them?

Good!

BURBA

No, 'tis ill.

RORIK

Whichever way, 'tis war.

BURBA

I like it not. His thought's all Ildico.
To-night he weds her: he'll have none of war
Nor state affairs; the woman fills his eyes,
He sees nought else. The world may howl for him.

RORIK

A week, and he'll be sated. Could a woman
Kindle him as last night we saw him kindled?

Did you not note the lightnings in his eye,
And how his words leapt after, quick as thunder?
That was a good night's work—if but he had let me
Slit the long throat of that fool Sigismund!

ESLA

The fellow lurks about still.

BURBA

Yet I doubt.

RORIK

What say you then to this? The Gothic kings
Are summoned hither.

BURBA

To the marriage-feast?

RORIK

They come with armies. Look across the plain,
Yonder's a moving glitter. It is they!
The spears of Ardaric and Valamir.
Down to the gate!

ESLA

Down to the gate!

RORIK

Come on!

[*The HUNS go out, left.*]

A crowd of people come noisily on the scene, followed by the Roman envoys MESSALLA and LAETUS, before whom the Moorish dwarf ZERCON marches with antic gestures.

ZERCON

The King shall hear you. I have power with him.
I have my own cause too that I shall plead.
Trust me, you men of Rome ! I wield a sword
And wag a tongue as well.

A MAN

Your champion, Romans !

A WOMAN

Faint hearts, a champion !

MEN AND WOMEN

Zercon !

ZERCON

Follow me,

People ! I go to give the Gothic kings

My welcome.

[Exeunt all but the Romans.]

LAETUS

Are all mad, or is it we ?

MESSALLA

This is the future, Laetus. We are past ;
These are our conquerors.

LAETUS

Rome, what a rabble !
Here's all the quartered world jostling in fragments.

MESSALLA

Our mould is cracked ; here is the molten ore
Streaming and seething.

LAETUS

Were I Cæsar now,
I'd catch and cage these motley chatterers
And watch their apish antics, for the jest.
And yet our errand's as fantastical.
I thought it always mad, but madder now.
A princess of the purple, Cæsar's sister,
Proffers her troth, her uninvited troth,
To this barbarian ; sends a ring to him,
And woos him, woos this wild boar in his den.
'Tis a wild story !—Come, we are refused,
Scorned, slighted : what can profit to stay on ?
We have seen——

MESSALLA

But have not conquered. No, I stay
And win this audience. Attila shall hear.

Will you go back and tell Honoria
 'We went, and we did nothing, and return'?

LAETUS

Her pride will rage at this indignity.

MESSALLA

Yes, if we fail, but not if we succeed.
 I find that Onegesius the Greek
 Contrives all here. I spoke with him apart.
 I think—but see, he comes.

Enter ONEGESIUS.

LAETUS

It is all madness.

MESSALLA

Well?

ONEGESIUS

Attila will hear you—upon condition.

MESSALLA

The terms?

ONEGESIUS

A public audience.

MESSALLA

Impossible.

ONEGESIUS

Speak what you will, but speak it before all.
King Attila will hear and welcome you.

MESSALLA

Our matter is for him and him alone.

ONEGESIUS

His ways are open ; he keeps no private ear.

LAETUS

Renegade Greek ! Let us back to Rome, Messalla.

ONEGESIUS

As you will.

[*Exit, right.*]

MESSALLA

Patience !

LAETUS

I am sick of patience !

Do you imagine, were Honoria here
And saw her foolish daydream by daylight,
And found herself a gibe and castaway
Among these hideous Huns, she would endure
An instant ? O, post back to Italy !
Think of your garden on the Aventine,
Your library, your fishponds, waiting you——

MESSALLA

They are waiting always, Laetus.

[SIGISMUND, *hooded, comes up to them.*]

Who is this?

LAETUS

He stares at us intently.

MESSALLA

Are you a Hun?

SIGISMUND

A Hun! I would rather go upon four legs
Than be a beast on two.

MESSALLA

Yet you are here.

SIGISMUND

This is my land, not theirs.

MESSALLA

Then Attila

You love not?

SIGISMUND

Were my fingers at his throat!—

You are from Rome. He is your enemy
Eternal. You will see him face to face—
O were I you!

A T T I L A

MESSALLA

What then?

SIGISMUND

[*with a gesture*]

A little thing.

LAETUS

This is a little thing. [Showing a dagger.]

MESSALLA

Your thoughts run fast.

But Attila refuses us, my friend.

We are dismissed his presence.

SIGISMUND

Attila

Is ruled.

MESSALLA

How?

SIGISMUND

By a woman.

MESSALLA

Who is she?

SIGISMUND

Burgundy's last of royalty, Ildico,

My foster-sister.

LAETUS

What, another princess !

O happy Hun !

SIGISMUND

To-night he weds her.

LAETUS

Weds !

SIGISMUND

Unless—You are Romans, you bring news from
Rome,

Business of moment, doubtless, that shall turn
His mind to heavier issues. What is a woman
When policy is in the balance? Go,
Get his ear, divert him. Women love to taste
Their power upon a man. Seek Ildico,
She will persuade him.

LAETUS

Excellent foster-brother !

MESSALLA

Where is this princess ?

SIGISMUND

I will bring her to you.

[SIGISMUND *passes into* ILDICO'S house.]

ATTILA

LAETUS

Wedded to-night ! Honoria's dream 's a dream !
Home again, home : all 's ended, come !

MESSALLA

Not yet.

LAETUS

What ?

MESSALLA

Let it be a dream. I never feared
Its coming true, or would have stayed at home.
Attila will deride it, I know well.
But I have promised to Honoria
To give the ring, and I will give the ring.
Moreover, I will see this Hun, whom Rome
Pays tribute of her fear to.

[ILDICO comes out attended by CUNEGONDE and
maids.]

LAETUS

O, she 's fair !

ILDICO

Are you from Rome ?

MESSALLA

Princess, we are from Rome.

ILDICO

What brings you hither? Do you await the
King?

MESSALLA

We crave a private audience of the King
Which he refuses. Must we go empty away
And say in Rome that Attila—— [*He hesitates.*]

ILDICO

Say on.

MESSALLA

That Attila unroyally withholds
His ear from honourable embassies,
Abstaining from that ancient courtesy,
The privilege of kings? Shall we report
That Attila is afraid? Princess, you know
'Tis not so, but I think he is abused
In counsel. Could we see him face to face,
Then would he listen, then would be himself;
But it seems Onegesius holds the power.

ILDICO

Onegesius! I will ask the King. I think
That you shall have your audience. Stay mean-
while.

Fetch some wine hither! Do you refresh yourselves.
[*She signs to her maids, who re-enter the
house.*]

MESSALLA

Princess, we thank you, from our hearts we thank you.

[*Exit ILDICO into the house of ATTILA. CUNEGONDE remains in the background.*]

LAETUS

Who would have sought such beauty here?—She rules him.

MESSALLA

For the moment.

LAETUS

What new thought possesses you?

MESSALLA

I listen : I can hear the coming roar
Of chaos, when the keystone 's struck away
From this rude arch of empire.

LAETUS

Attila?

Give that Burgundian opportunity—

[*Two maids return, bringing wine and cakes on gold dishes, then retire.*]

I am weary. Drink ! To the fair Ildico !

[*He drinks, but sets down the cup with a wry face.*]

And may she come not to as sour an end !

O, golden dishes !

[*Nibbles at a cake.*]

MESSALLA

What was in that sigh?

LAETUS

Nothing ; a memory. A bath, Messalla,
Some olives, and a bath !

ILDICO

[*re-entering*]

King Attila

Gives audience—but to one.

LAETUS

Not both?

ILDICO

To one.

LAETUS

Then you, Messalla.

MESSALLA

Now?

ILDICO

Immediately.

MESSALLA

Thanks, noble princess, for your intercession.
Would that our gratitude could match your grace !
[*Exit* MESSALLA.]

ILDICO

Tell me of Rome.

LAETUS

What shall I say? A city
That is utterly awearied of itself.
Why, did you pace upon the Roman streets,
You'd find yourself a wonder; next, a worship;
Flowers, odes, a hundred lovers at your feet;
And on the morrow, nothing: out-of-date,
A yesterday; we love not yesterdays.
We live for pleasure, princess—a hard life!

ILDICO

Is every Roman so? Yet Rome is feared.
Is there no pith and mettle in her sons?
No spirit and no daring?

LAETUS

I have heard
Those words, but never used them, mettle and
daring;
And it was on such lovely lips as yours
I heard them last, with such indignant tone.—
Rome boasts a princess whom our poets hymn
The moon of Italy, the rose of fame,
Though I would swear the face I look upon
Would turn them traitors.

ILDICO

Only a woman, then?

Does it not shame you to be called a man?

How is she named?

LAETUS

Honoria.

ILDICO

And a princess?

LAETUS

The Emperor's sister.

ILDICO

She should be your queen—

O, can you not catch fire from such a heart?

LAETUS

'Tis prettier pleasure to see others burn

Than burn oneself. Unhappy Honoria!

ILDICO

Unhappy? I perceive this is a soul

You cannot understand, of purest flame

That wastes itself unfuelled; yet I think

She is happier than you that mock at her.

LAETUS

She is unhappy, for she sits and sighs

Beside her palace window all day long,

And gazing over roofs and roar of Rome
Dreams of a hero, fancying, poor she,
If the north wind blow, it may bring her news
Of Attila.

ILDICO

Of Attila !

LAETUS

Her hero,
Her Attila, her world-subduing king,
Whose name is text and comment on our ways,
Whose greatness canopies the day, the night,
And puts the stars out. Ah, mere dreams, mere
dreams !
Unhappy she ! Your fame shall make Rome
envious !

Princess,

More happy than Honoria, farewell !

[*Exit* LAETUS. CUNEGONDE *comes forward.*]

ILDICO

[*coldly*]

Ah, Cunegonde !

CUNEGONDE

I heard.

ILDICO

If this be a Roman,
Rome is a bubble.

CUNEGONDE

And Honoria?

This lady that has all men at her feet——

ILDICO

What of her?

CUNEGONDE

Nothing.

ILDICO

Tell me, what of her?

CUNEGONDE

This only, that she loves your Attila,
And sends these envoys——

ILDICO

She! High state affairs,
Not woman's messages they come upon.

CUNEGONDE

And yet——

ILDICO

No more. Go!

[*Exit* CUNEGONDE.]

Now, if that were true,
And Attila listen? Shame, O shame for me!—
O what is love, that we should speak of it

So fair and fondly? It is fierce, not kind ;
Cruel, not tender ; 'tis not a thing we own ;
It clutches us, and will not let us go ;
It is a stream we drown in, a strong stream
That sweeps us out of sight of home, of friends,
Of our own souls, of everything.

[*With sudden change of tone.*] 'Tis written
In heaven that I am his, my Attila's ;
A bond unbreakable, and in that bond
My body is made holy to him, and I
More wonderful than woman.

Honorio?

The truth ! I'll seek him ; I must know the truth !

[*Exit, right.*]

SCENE II

An audience-chamber, plainly furnished. ATTILA is seated on a low dais, left. MESSALLA stands at the right, the SLAVE who carries the treasure stands behind. At the back a curtained door. MESSALLA has just finished speaking.

ATTILA

I find no matter for my private ear
In this. I think my patience is abused.

MESSALLA

My prologue's ended. But for what's to come
I crave your secrecy : this is a theme
Nearer and more familiar. But meanwhile
Let Attila accept a gift from Rome.—
Pour out your treasure, slave, at the King's feet.

*[The SLAVE advances, but is stopped by a
gesture from ATTILA.]*

ATTILA

Hold ! Come no nearer. Leave the treasure there.
Dismiss the slave. We are alone. Speak on.
How, hesitating ? Do you moisten lips
For this that was so instant to be said ?

MESSALLA

I doubt to find the words that shall commend
My mission.

ATTILA

State affairs are suited best
With plain words. What would the Emperor
with me ?

MESSALLA

Your pardon ! I must seek to tune my speech
To other issues, though an old man's lips
Discourse them strangely ; yet, if I am old,
I have seen the more, and ageing with my kind

Know nothing's strange that's human. Wisdom is
Not to despise : the thread of fate, wherein
Events are bound and huge dominions hang,
Is often spun of tissue delicate
As sighs, as dreams, a thread that one might burst
Against the beating of a woman's heart.

ATTILA

Come, come ! what would you speak of?

MESSALLA

Of a woman.

It is a woman uses speech in me.

ATTILA

Is Rome so manless and emasculate
That women send ambassadors?

MESSALLA

Hear yet

Before you judge, O Attila. It is
A woman, but imperial, sends me hither.
You know the Emperor has a sister, young,
A ripe eighteen—Honorio ; she is one
Whose nature will not starve in custom's mould,
But breaks in precious fire—how shall I say?
You will not understand how I am moved
In speaking of her ; a spirit that rebels
From seeming what she is not, chooses, wills,

And stops not at the halting-place of fear.
 Whatever moves her, moves her to the quick.
 She is proud ; yet giving, she gives absolutely :
 Her nature is a queen. And Cæsar fears her,
 Grudges her scope, sets spies upon her, mews
 Her wings in palace walls that prison her ;
 Even now debates within some convent's gate
 For ever to exile her.

ATTILA

What of this ?

Cæsar may dungeon half a hundred sisters,
 I will not stir to help or draw the bolt.
 What's this to me ?

MESSALLA

Alas ! upon this theme
 My tongue grows garrulous. Then, to be brief,
 This young, imperious, and unmated heart,
 Finding about her none to incarnate
 The greatness that she dreams of,—for she dreams
 Of such a Cæsar as the Julian star
 Mourned, when the master of all nations fell—
 Would sponge away five hundred years, to breathe
 Heroic times again, and living caged
 Fosters the more such fancies as, you know,
 Flower in a prison, wither in the world,—
 She turns from Rome to far horizons : there

She hears one name fill all the North with dread,
The rumour of one spirit matching hers
In greatness of adventure and desire.

ATTILA

Whom do you speak of?

MESSALLA

Whom but Attila?

As queen to king, she sends her embassy ;
Proudly and freely thus declares her heart.
Honorius weds with Attila or none ;
In proof and pledge whereof she sends this ring
Affiancing her heart and destiny.

ATTILA

Give me the ring. What story or device
Is wrought upon the gem?

MESSALLA

It shows the fleece
Old poets tell of, like that bearded star
We watched last night, hung golden in the gloom
Of jealous forests, and the dragon coiled
About the tree-trunk with a burning eye.
Apollodorus, the Sicilian, made
The gem : for modern workmanship 'tis well,
Though I could show you in my cabinet——

ATTILA

[*with sudden change of tone*]

What talk is this of toys and girls and rings?
Say now what business brought you?

MESSALLA

All is said.

A girl's whim, doubtless, 'tis but a girl's whim.
She should have paced an ampler age than ours.
We maim her, a proud marble of old time
In dust and wreck found beautiful, but maimed ;
But I—I am her friend, and for my friendship
She chose me for this errand, and because
My years perhaps seemed fitter to commend
Her act as not a folly, though a folly
To Attila it is ; and if 'tis so
She is answered : but to Attila's own ear
I have committed it ; my duty's done.

ATTILA

[*starting up*]

So with this patched and most unlikely tale
You thought to blind me, and behind this mask
Of trumpery and words to carry off
Your baffled plot ! You have not fooled me. No,
Your errand was my murder !

MESSALLA

God forbid !

ATTILA

Am I a dolt, a round-eyed innocent,
That know not your Italian practices?
'Twas tried before : Byzantium bribed a man
To stab me in close audience ; now 'tis Rome.
You meant to do it while that slave of yours
Poured out the gold and while I fingered it.

MESSALLA

I swear——

ATTILA

What were you hired with to remove
Rome's nightmare, and pull down the hated Hun?
Why, Cæsar's purple, Valentinian's throne
Were less than just reward !

MESSALLA

King, I confess,
Were Attila no more, Rome would sleep sounder ;
But not a Roman stirred a finger here.

ATTILA

I say, my death was plotted ere you came,
Ay, chuckled over in the Capitol !

MESSALLA

Not so, I swear, no, nor a dream of it.
I come, ambassador to Attila,
And with no thought but of my embassy,

An office sacred out of time to kings,
As mine should be to you.

ATTILA

Ambassador !

Embassy from a girl—a shameless girl,
If what you say be truth ; if truth, 'tis folly
That merits no respect ; but it is false,
Pretence and pretext. Do you think to escape
Because you are foiled, or that I honour names
Put on for cloaks, or spare because you are old—
The older, the worse fool ?

[*Calling RORIK, who appears instantly.*]

Take out this man,

And tie him up to be an archer's mark,—
My Huns have lacked a target—and proclaim,
Thus Attila deals with traitors, and with spies
Usurping honourable offices.

MESSALLA

So be it : let my death dishonour you,
O Attila. No matter : my term's ripe.
A Roman dies—but Rome remains.

ATTILA

Come back.

I have a word yet.—Rorik, wait without.

[*After a pause.*]

I did not think Rome bred such spirits still ;

Come, sir, be open. Coward you are not,
Nor should be fool. Put off the mask : you are
free.

What deeper purpose brings you to this place?
No hand shall harm you, so you tell me all.

MESSALLA

It is all told, condemn it as you will
For folly or for fiction ; truth it is
Princess Honoria sent you the ring,
Praying me earnestly to deliver it
Into your very hands ; nothing but this
Was my commission, nothing else my purpose.

ATTILA

[*to himself*]

It's true, then, this mad story of the ring.
A woman, again a woman !

[*To MESSALLA.*] What's your name?

MESSALLA

Messalla.

ATTILA

Go, Messalla ; you have seen
That Attila is armed, yet can be mild.
Go back to Rome——

MESSALLA

If I am free to go,
I pray you, let me take the ring again,
Honorias silent and sufficient answer.

ATTILA

No ; tell your princess I accept the ring,
'Tis on my finger, say you saw it there,
And say besides that at my chosen time
I come to claim her. How, not pleased? What's
ill?

Pluck laurel for your brows, ambassador !
Honorias shall crown you.

[*Calling to RORIK, who appears.*] Rorik, give
This Roman escort. He is free.

[*Exit MESSALLA with RORIK.*]

Bald fool !

If this be she Fate points her finger at,
Not Ildico, but she? A Roman girl,
Essenced and puny, and that has no shame
To cast herself before an unknown man !
Such women please me not at all. And yet
Rome on my finger ! The gem glitters at me.
A world of cities, old and populous,
The ports of traffic with wide seas between,
Enfortressed armies, tributary kings,
Rivers and corn-lands, mountains veined with gold,
The hopes, the fears of hundred nations, all

Contracted to one point of changing light
Upon my finger.

[*Calling.*] Onegesius!

What was it the sorcerer said? A woman, a woman!
Enemy born, yet may be turned to boon.

Honorio chimes as well as Ildico.

Doubt wins upon my soul, but it is she.

[*A SLAVE enters.*]

Call Onegesius!—Must I dance a puppet
And women pull the strings? I? What's one
woman

More than another?

ILDICO *enters.*

O, she comes!

ILDICO

My lord,

Am I admitted now? What is afoot?

Tell me—your brows are knitted—tell your bride
What brought these Romans hither?

ATTILA

State affairs.

ILDICO

Trouble?

ATTILA

No trouble.

ILDICO

Good, then?

ATTILA

Who can tell?

But there's no trouble possible, when my eyes
Have joy of you, my Ildico.

ILDICO

My lord,

Is it true you love me?

ONEGESIUS *enters.*

ATTILA

Doubt all else but that.

ILDICO

Even to the end?

ATTILA

Even to the end. But see,
Grave counsels call me. Onegesius comes.
We must unravel intricate affairs—
And then to feast ; and then——

ILDICO

Have you no more

To tell me?

ATTILA

Till to-night, sweet, till to-night !

[ILDICO *goes out slowly*, ONEGESIUS *comes forward.*]

Is she not fair?

ATTILA

ONEGESIUS

Too fair not to be feared.
But you'll not hear me.

ATTILA

Is she not a shape
To body forth the purposes of Gods?
Can they create such meaning to the eye,
Inscribe all-glorious hopes and histories
On form and feature, but to gull the soul
That is the eye's dupe? O, I doubt she's nothing!
Mortal flesh, a fair body, nothing more!—
Fetch me that sorcerer, I have need of him.

ONEGESIUS

He is dead.

ATTILA

Since when?

ONEGESIUS

He died at your command.

ATTILA

I never ordered——

ONEGESIUS

But consented.

ATTILA

O,
By plague and thunder, you have served me ill!

ONEGESIUS

What need to ply him further? All is known.
The oracle's already part fulfilled,
The rest's to come.

ATTILA

I tell you, all's not known.
Look on my hand.

ONEGESIUS

A ring!

ATTILA

A Roman ring,
A gift.

ONEGESIUS

From Cæsar?

ATTILA

No, from Cæsar's sister.

ONEGESIUS

Honorio?

ATTILA

She. And with the ring she gives
Her heart and fate, her body and her soul.
What say you?

ONEGESIUS

Rome itself is in the ring.

O the imperial hostage ! 'Tis an army
Given over to you in the enemy's camp.—
Why, this speaks clearer than all oracles
Rome shall be yours.

ATTILA

Think you so? Think you so?

'Tis like the silent action of immortals
To crown us with the long despaired of prize.
I have heard of stars that tumbled in the lap
Of despised women, and enthroned them queens.
But O, to pluck and wrench this rooted joy
Out of my breast ! Honoria's a name
Unwelcomed, thrust on me : but Ildico—
Her lips have been on mine, and I had built
An image high as heaven in desire
Of her fulfilling soul.—Well, crumble, dreams !
Be it only her sweet body, she is mine !
Are the armies summoned ?

ONEGESIUS

Valamir and Ardarc
Are come, their hosts are camped at hand.

ATTILA

'Tis well.
Hernak yet lives. What if the omens lied ?

My curse on weakness that entreats for signs
And promises contemptuously cast
As bones to dogs ! These double-dealing Fates
Laugh at us, when we dread them. From this hour
They shall dread me. Let shifting omens point
To Ildico or to Honoria,
I laugh, for both are given me, both are mine !

ONEGESIUS

Nay, take my counsel : choose. To clutch at both
May be to lose both.

ATTILA

By this glittering ring
I will have Rome.—Take means to set on foot,
To-morrow, our preparation for the march.
And Ildico——

ONEGESIUS

Forswear her, Attila.

ATTILA

Tumble the towers of earth and heaven, not I !
No, though the superstitious glory 's gone,
She 's my possession. If the world is mine
To break within my hands, shall I renounce
The spice and sting that 's at the core of it ?

ONEGESIUS

Ay, better so, when the Gods give you Rome.

ATTILA

Onegesius, hark ! We that rode over earth
And trod it down, we are masters ; shall not we
Invade these Powers that lurk within the cave
Of time to be, and mock and baffle us ?
Show me the thing that boldness cannot quell !
I swear, did we burst in, our swords should find
Fate cowering there.

ONEGESIUS

As perilous a world,
Perhaps, you are invading now.

ATTILA

What mean you ?

ONEGESIUS

A woman's soul.

ATTILA

O women, women, women !
Flowers to be plucked,—what force is in a flower
To harm or to be feared ? Flowers to be plucked !

CURTAIN

ACT IV

SCENE

A hall set out with small tables and with a double throne, left, on a dais. At the back, between two pillars, an inner chamber masked by heavy curtains.

As the curtain rises, HERNAK is discovered, seated on the throne, alone. KERKA enters, right.

KERKA

I have sought you——

HERNAK

I am here.

KERKA

On the king's throne !

HERNAK

One day I must be king.

KERKA

[embracing him]

My noble boy !

In you I live, in you I am avenged.

May she be barren, may she have no child,

She that usurps me ! May her beauty be

A flower that withers and is tossed away !

May she too drink the cup that I drink of,

And may it be thrice bitter to her soul !

Son, my own son, live, for I live in you !

HERNAK

Let me go, mother !

KERKA

Hernak, promise me !

HERNAK

What ?

KERKA

This : be absent from the feast to-night.

HERNAK

I am to stand upon the King's right hand.

KERKA

Yes ; always. But to-night your place shall want
you.

The King shall want you and shall ask for you;
But you 'll be absent. For my sake do this.

HERNAK

I was to stand upon the King's right hand.
My father will be angered.

[*Relenting.*] Yet, I will.

But let me go now ; I must seek abroad
Among the captains, for they talk of war.

KERKA

O no, stay by me !

Hark ! the music comes.

We must be gone now. Music for her feet !
Nay, swifter, swifter ! dance her to her doom !

[*A file of girls holding above their heads a long
white scarf enters in a rhythmical dance,
preceding ILDICO, who takes her stand upon
the dais. KERKA standing with HERNAK,
over against ILDICO, right.*]

Ay, glory now ! Be flushed, be blind with bliss !
Heap up the dizzy moment with delight
Ere it be spilt, as soon it shall be spilt,
And thou, supplanter, be supplanted ! Then
Shalt thou come hither where now Kerka stands,
With no son by thy side ; that haughty head
Be humble, and thou discarded and abhorred ;
And then the Roman woman in thy place——

ILDICO

[speaking in exaltation]

I fear not any woman upon earth.
I have that certainty within my soul
Which mocks at past and future. So, hate on.
I pity thee, so poisoned.

KERKA

Pity rather
Thine own awakening to reality,
With thy lost faith fixed on a faithless man.

ILDICO

Fixed in the great heavens shines unchangeable
My destiny for ever.

*[Music. The HUNS begin to troop in to the
banquet, chanting the conclusion of a war-
song.]*

Where the Dragon-banner streamed,
Armies quaked and rolled asunder ;
Lightnings on our lances gleamed,
Cities splintered at our thunder.

Riding like the whirlwind's breath
We were Famine, we were Death ;
Send us such another day,
Attila, our Attila !

*[As the HUNS take their seats, ARDARIC and
VALAMIR come in and occupy each a high*

seat. ATTILA enters, holding out his arms to HERNAK, who turns from him and goes out with KERKA. ATTILA with a laugh passes on to the throne.]

ATTILA

Kings, princes, warriors, whose assembling swords
 Array our bridal banquet, welcome all !
 Out of our birth-land of remotest East
 What goad of God has pricked us, and driven on,
 A storm against all storms, like thunder-wind,
 Hither across uncounted plains and streams
 You know ; and here a white flower of the West
 To my rough soul, so lately scarred with loss,
 Brings balsam, and my fortune crowns afresh.
 Heaven prophesied this in yon sudden star.
 Behold my bride, the gentle Ildico !
 Behold your queen, the noble Ildico !
 Pledge us in wine, in the red wine, my Huns,
 To your queen ; drink ! To the fair Ildico !

HUNS

Attila, hail ! Ildico, hail ! Attila and Ildico, hail !
 hail !

ESLA

No word of war.

RORIK

Wait, there 's a word to come.

BURBA

Ill comes of wedding with a Western bride.

ILDICO

[*rising*]

My King, I pledge thee in the cup, and drink
To the glory of Attila.

HUNS

Attila, Attila !

ILDICO

Where your King rides, there Ildico will ride.

ESLA

Hear you that, Burba ? Royal as she's fair !

ATTILA

Wine, kings and captains, let the wine go round.
Laugh your full hearts out, revel at your ease.
No trumpet cries us to the field to-night,
No, nor to-morrow. Come, a long regale,
That tosses care into the dancing cup,
The cup of mirth and joy.

[*Movement of disappointment among the*
HUNS.]

BURBA

Pah, fondling hands !

He dotes upon her with a glistening eye.

[ZERCON *enters, martially arrayed in grotesque magnificence, amid the laughter of the banqueters.*]

ZERCON

Majesty, a boon !

[*He draws his sword with a fierce air as a HUN intercepts him.*]

Fellow, my falchion 's bare !

Hands off, or I shall split you, crown to fork !

RORIK

Toss the imp to me.

ZERCON

Majesty, a boon !

ATTILA

A song, then, for the boon.

HUNS

Zercon, a song !

ZERCON

I mouth no songs ; I am a man of deeds.

HUNS

Zercon, a song ! A battle-song, a war-song !

H

ATTILA

Let the knave speak.

ZERCON

O King, this night gives you
A wife, but me it robs ; I had a wife.
A yellow Goth has stolen her from me.
Avenge me !

RORIK

Man of deeds !

ZERCON

The monster fled ;
He feared me.

ATTILA

You shall have another wife,
And I will choose her. Women are the spoils
For heroes, Zercon.

ZERCON

The King's choice for me !
Most bounteous thanks. Some wine, give me
some wine !

HUNS

A song, a war-song !

RORIK

War !

ATTILA

What, still untuned
 To revel ! Does the bull stamp in the stall ?
 Drink deeper ! Camps of mire in the foul fog
 And sinew-biting frost,—would you have all
 You toiled in, rather than the toil's reward ?
 Feast and carouse ! Bethink you of the drouth,
 The fiery dust, the thirsts unquenchable,
 Then relish the full beaker ! Parch your throats
 With hot remembrance, that the flooding wine
 May drown it. Come, unharness those swift
 thoughts.
 Tastes not the wine well ? Must you hear the
 sound
 Of axe and arrow ere you savour it ?

RORIK

Now mark !

ATTILA

Forget ! can you not quite forget
 Music of battle, sword on helmet ringing,
 Spear dinting shield ?

A HUN

Give us that sound again——

BURBA

Then we will revel !

ATTILA

RORIK

Swords for Attila !

HUNS

‘ Send us such another day,
Attila, our Attila !’

[*The HUNS raise their swords, and gather
nearer ATTILA.*]

ATTILA

Huns !

ESLA

The King speaks.

ATTILA

Huns !

MANY VOICES

Hark to Attila !

ATTILA

Huns, that have over-ridden earth with me,
Will you not rest?

HUNS

Never !

ATTILA

Nor sit at ease,
Warriors of mine? The pleasant earth is yours.

HUNS

To horse, to battle ! Let us ride again !

ATTILA

Huns, I exult to see you, hear you, feel you.
When I have reined my horse in, stamping earth
Before the charge, and quivering in the flank,
So have I felt a mettle answer mine,
As now in you it answers.

RORIK

War at last !

ATTILA

What ! Did you deem me idle, sleep-benumbed
And sloth-corrupted ? Me ? Then know my soul
Smouldered, because it burned more deep within ;
And while you chafed and muttered—did you not ?—
My purpose swelled and ripened. The hour strikes
To show it.

HUNS

Show it us !

ATTILA

King Ardaric,

How many spears are counted in your host ?

ARDARIC

Five thousand by the river, and seven times more
Beyond the pass.

ATTILA

King Valamir, say you
How many can you add?

VALAMIR

Not a man less
Than thirty thousand for my summons wait
Beside the ford of Danube.

ATTILA

Huns, you hear?
Now, Hun and Goth and Gepid, since the time
Chimes with your temper, and my mood with both,
Behold the Sword!

*[He shows the sacred sword at his belt, and
drawing it, holds it erect.]*

ALL

The Sword of God!

ATTILA

You know
My meaning. When this Sword is girded on,
You know my vows are taken, and my resolve
Not put from me till this is put from me :
And my will holds to march.

ALL

Whither, whither?

ATTILA

On Rome !

ALL

On Rome ! Rome shall be ours !
Rome ! Rome !

[*Amid the excited cries of the HUNS, SIGISMUND suddenly enters.*]

SIGISMUND

Huns, let a word be spoken in your midst
Of one that tasted your King's clemency.
To-night he weds with a Burgundian bride :
Shall Burgundy be silent ? Here and now
I dedicate my sword to Attila.

[*Drawing his sword, he rushes at ATTILA.*
ILDICO *throws herself in his way, but*
SIGISMUND *is at once cut down by the*
HUNS.]

ILDICO

Sigismund !

SIGISMUND

[*expiring*]

Ildico ! traitress Ildico !
[*A black cloak is flung over the body, which is carried out while ATTILA speaks.*]

ATTILA

A victim, Huns ! A victim that the Gods
Slay for my glory. He who seeks my life
Finds his own doom. Not twice nor thrice a stab
Has meant me and has failed. An omen, Huns,—
The Gods, the Gods have Attila in charge,—
An omen on the threshold of our war.
Let not this fool's irruption on our feast
Distaste your mirth and cloud your revelry ;
Yet, for my bride's sake, to your several homes
Pass and disperse. To-night is for the feast,
To-morrow trumpets us to Italy,
And greets us in the saddle with the sun.

[*The HUNS pass out clashing shields and crying
'Rome! Rome!' ILDICO has been stand-
ing transfixed with horror. ATTILA turns
to her exulting.*]

Now, crown of joys !

ILDICO

That spilt blood curses me.
O that 'twas I had fallen at your feet,
Pierced by his steel, my body given for you !

ATTILA

What, yon poor madman, gulping at his doom ?
For simple serpents and contriving doves
There is no room in nature. But for us——

ILDICO

O Attila, I gave, and you have taken.
I have cast away all, all that was my own,—
See, my own blood judges and curses me!—
Say it again, say it is willed in Heaven,
Say that you love me! By that starry bond,
That bond of faith which knots us even to death,
Give me oblivion, give me——

ATTILA

[suddenly seizing her in his arms]

Ildico!

ILDICO

Hold me and hide me and drown me in your love,
The greatness and the glory of your love!

ATTILA

Toss all away that burns not in this kiss—
Be strained, you sweetness, strained into my arms.
They shall crush out remembrance into wine
Of ecstasy so fierce you shall not think,
Fear, hope, remember, in the pangs of joy!
I'd cast a kingdom in the seas to-night,
For the Gods envy me.

[Holding her at arm's length.]

O never yet

In teeming Time was such a beauty born
As lives in you and flames. It stings, it maddens!
Thou red wine, I will drink thee!

ATTILA

ILDICO

[catching his hand to hold him off]

Ah, you hurt !

—What is that ring upon your hand? Not mine !

ATTILA

No, but 'tis mine. Do you covet it, the gem?
See in the core of it a winking fire
Glow like a dragon's eye ; now it is changed
To colder than a moonbeam, splintered ice,
And now again all angry.

ILDICO

Give it me !

ATTILA

It ravishes your eye? It is from Rome.
A cunning craftsman made it.

ILDICO

Rome? From Rome?

Honoriam, Honoriam sent it you !

ATTILA

Who has blabbed? What know you of Honoriam?
No matter, it is mine.

ILDICO

Fling it away !

ATTILA

Ha, ha !

A dream-sick girl, mewed in a palace cage,
That hunts her wandering fancy on the wind,
And dotes upon a man she never saw—
A milky-hearted girl, in love with dreams,
She sends me this.

ILDICO

You suffer it? Accept?

Give me the ring !

ATTILA

What will you do with it?

ILDICO

Trample it with my heel, grind it to dust,
Since you forget my honour and your own.

ATTILA

Soft, soft ; I keep it for my uses, sweet,—
State matters you 've no need acquaintance of.
Let the toy be, I shall not wear it more
Till——

ILDICO

Perjury ! If any meaning lives
In such a token, such a gift, this hand
Is false, and plighted to Honoria.
This was the Roman's errand that you hid

So secret, and for this you march on Rome
Nor tell your bride a word ! O perjured hand !
—I'll not believe it ! Say you jest. 'Tis cruel
To jest so, yet I'll pardon.

ATTILA

Ay, a jest,

A good jest !

ILDICO

Then give me the ring.

ATTILA

Not now.

Another time. We waste our life's delight.
This night's for sweeter use than argument.
Come, kiss and pardon.

ILDICO

No, you love me not !

You love me not, that wear another's ring,
Exile me from your inmost purposes,
And tell me last what you should tell me first—
Me whom you vowed the passion of your fate,
Queen of your destiny, your soul, your star——

ATTILA

The stars are broken ; I am destiny.
In the night's crooked characters let fools
Read their own folly.

ILDICO

Is it nothing, all
You vowed to me beneath that burning star
With earnest eyes and dedicating lips,
Prophecies that entwined us to all time,
False?

ATTILA

A false prophet gulled me with his lies.
I am I, and you are mine.

ILDICO

You love not me!

ATTILA

O, by all torments of desire, I do!

ILDICO

False!

ATTILA

Yes, all's false but beauty; all is false,
A wilderness of falsehood, but your hair
That stings me, and the crimson of your mouth,
And white throat, and warm panting of your
breast—

And they are mine, they shall be mine, mine!

Hark!

How my Huns revel! We will plumb a well
Of bliss beyond their thought.

ILDICO

[breaking violently from him]

O shame, O shame !

A woman such as you would toss to wive

With that misfeatured Moor. False, false, false !

ATTILA

Ah !

Stand so, and let the lovely anger blaze !

I'll not begrudge it fuel. Let it spark

Cheek and eye ; beauty is thrice beautiful

So passionately coloured. I am drunk

With joy of gazing on this beauty.—Yet,

Where I am, I am master ; and these arms

Can crush as well as cherish. So, be taught.

Come, come ! I did but tease that angry mood.

Here are your maids to tire you. Wait me
quickly.*[ATTILA goes out as CUNEGONDE enters with
attendant women.]*

ILDICO

A moment, yet a moment, Cunegonde !

[CUNEGONDE retires.]

Traitor ! No, no ! I am not that, no, no !

All terror is come true. It must be done !

[She kneels down and prays.]

Gods of my fathers, I have sinned against you :

My eyes were blinded, and I could not see.
 Change this distempered fever, that I thought
 Was love, and noble ; purge it from my heart ;
 Let me be clean. O, if you did withhold
 Your presence for this time, now doubly fill
 My soul, my veins ! Lift me from weakness up.
 O send me strength, strength, agony, but strength !
 Let me not now be humbled by this man ;
 Let me be one remembrance of my blood
 That never yet was vile or bore a shame,
 And being shamed rises to be avenged.
 Make these hands strong to strike him !

[*Rising and calling to CUNEGONDE.*] Cunegonde !

[CUNEGONDE, GISLA, and maids enter with
*robes, a silver mirror, etc. During this
 scene CUNEGONDE speaks with intense and
 bitter irony.*]

Take off this robe !

It weighs me down.

CUNEGONDE

This robe is the King's gift.
 It is woven of one piece ; the hands that sewed
 Were hands of princesses, as smooth as flowers,
 Of Eastern princesses, of captive queens.
 It has been charmed and hallowed. The world's
 empress
 Might covet such a gift.

ILDICO

[throwing it from her]

The robe is soiled !

Take off these jewels.

CUNEGONDE

Jewels of such price
Would ransom twenty captains—who shall say
How far outvalue one man's lifeblood spilt
For his country !

ILDICO

Cunegonde !

[To the maids.] Go, one of you,
Fetch me that jewel which my mother wore.

GISLA

Of simple bronze ? It is not royal gold——

CUNEGONDE

Befitting for the bride of Attila !

ILDICO

[to the maids, one of whom goes to fetch the jewel]
Do as I ask.

[To GISLA.] Is not your father sick ?
You should be tending upon him, not me.

GISLA

The mirror, Queen !

ILDICO

[*holding the mirror*]

Is it I?

GISLA

You are changed to-night.

Your gaze is starry, you are far from us.

[*All the maids but CUNEGONDE retire.*]

ILDICO

I am ready.—Sooner than a mouth of shame

He shall kiss death.

CUNEGONDE

[*kneeling and kissing ILDICO's hand*]

I have wronged you, O my Queen!

Pardon!

ILDICO

[*moving as if to throw her arms round CUNEGONDE,
then checking herself, fearful of losing self-control*]

Good-night! Go! [*The bolting of a door is heard.*]

Go!

[*CUNEGONDE goes out. ILDICO stands motionless.*]

The end of the world!

[*With sudden excitement.*] I have no weapon !

Now,

You Gods, if there be justice, answer me !

[*She turns, hearing the step of ATTILA approaching, and as he enters unarmoured faces him, very calm. She sees the sword still at his belt, and her face is illuminated.*]

ATTILA

[*with astonishment and admiration in his voice*]

Thou miracle ! Thou vision ! Ildico !

No word ? I like thy coldness, my chaste bride.

I swear thy anger did not shine more fair

Than now—light breathes so through the end of
rain—

Comes thy submission. Lead me in, my bride !

ILDICO

My lord, command me. Do you wear a sword ?

ATTILA

The sword that fell from heaven. I have bound
it on

Because my vows are taken ; but to-night

Your fingers shall unbuckle it.

ILDICO

[*kneeling and unfastening the sword*]

Is it true

That Attila is proof to every blade
But this?

ATTILA

[*laughing*]

My Huns believe it, Ildico.

ILDICO

It is heavy.

ATTILA

With my fate.—Beyond this night
Who knows what waits me, what the storm of hours
Shall hurry me to meet, when the great thunders
Are breaking, and earth crimsoned, far and far,
To what wild seashores of the world? Come all!
To-night my heart sits on an easy throne,
Joy fills me, and love fills me; I am filled
With joy of you, my bride, my Ildico.
I am come into my kingdom. Lead me in!

[*They pass in together, ILDICO bearing the sword, to the inner chamber. The stage is left empty. Noise of the HUNS revelling without is faintly heard, changed suddenly to a different tone, as exclamations and questions rise to a dull uproar, coming closer. Out of the confusion at last distinct cries are heard. Hernak! The King! Hernak! They have killed Hernak!*]

VOICE OF RORIK

Knock on the door !

VOICE OF A HUN

I dare not !

VOICE OF RORIK

He shall know !

The King shall know that they have slain his son !
Open !

[ILDICO *glides out of the inner chamber and crouches panting.*]

ILDICO

I struck so hard, the hilt has hurt my hand ! . . .
Horrible vision, leap not out at me !
It was not I that did it ! I am weak !
And my hands tremble, tremble !

VOICE OF RORIK

Burst the bolt !

ILDICO

Ah ! terrible strong Gods that raised me up,
Fling me not down, cast me not quite away !
[*The door is burst open. She rises to her full height. RORIK and other HUNS with swords and torches rush in.*]

RORIK

The King !

ESLA

Hernak is slain !

RORIK

Where is the King?

ILDICO

Go back, go back ! You shall not enter here.

I have killed him, I have killed him ! He is dead !

[RORIK *passes her, and goes to the inner chamber, then staggers back, as if struck.*]

ESLA

What shakes you ?

RORIK

Tell me that I dreamed, not saw !

ESLA

[*looking in and returning*]

The Sword is in his heart,—the Sword of God !

ILDICO

Here, here in me ! Bury your blades in me !

ESLA

She is mad with horror.

ATTILA

RORIK

Attila is dead,
And God has slain him, God has smitten him !
[*They pass out into the crowd without ; wails
and furious cries repeat themselves into the
far distance.*]

ILDICO

[*listening transfixed*]

The pillar of the world is broken down :
And yet heaven has not fallen ! O Attila ! . . .
Gods of my country, now you are avenged !

CURTAIN



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